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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 001256

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DOL/ILAB FOR SEROKA MIHAIL, DRL/ILCSR FOR ALFRED ANZALDUA,  
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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [ELAB](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [UZ](#)  
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: UNICEF SHARES RESULTS OF CHILD LABOR  
ASSESSMENT

REF: A. TASHKENT 949  
[1](#)B. TASHKENT 1156  
[1](#)C. TASHKENT 1227  
[1](#)D. TASHKENT 1149

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: During a recent meeting with foreign diplomats, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) office in Tashkent announced that an informal assessment of child labor conducted by its employees found that students were still being mobilized for the cotton harvest, despite the government's adoption in September of a National Action Plan to combat child labor. UNICEF reported that the age of students and conditions varied widely by region - the vast majority of children were older than eleven, but children as young as nine were observed picking cotton in some regions. In addition, UNICEF reported that there was no evidence of children being exposed to harmful pesticides; that greater numbers of adults were mobilized to pick cotton this year; and that a boycott of Uzbek cotton by American and European retailers was negatively impacting textile producers in Bangladesh. UNICEF representatives believed that local officials were under added pressure this year to mobilize children to meet their cotton quotas due to a poor harvest brought on by inclement weather and water shortages. They also argued that any serious attempt to combat child labor in Uzbekistan should not aim to eradicate the problem overnight, but rather should be part of a long-term strategy that addresses broader and related issues, including labor migration and the quota system. Observations by Embosffs and local journalists and human rights activists generally tracked with UNICEF's conclusions. Separately, the government announced that it would reduce the amount of cotton to be sown next year.

[1](#)2. (C) The government's failure to prevent children from being mobilized for the cotton harvest this year - while

disappointing - comes as no surprise, as the government's National Action Plan was overly ambitious. We agree with UNICEF that any serious effort to combat child labor in Uzbekistan should address related issues and aim for incremental improvements over the long-term. End summary.

#### UNICEF HOSTS ANOTHER INFORMAL ROUNDTABLE ON CHILD LABOR

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13. (C) On October 20, UNICEF hosted another informal roundtable on child labor during Uzbekistan's cotton harvest, which was attended by poloff and representatives of the French, German, Italian, Czech, Romanian, and Japanese Embassies and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). UNICEF Child Protection Officer Siyma Barkin and UNICEF Head Representative Mahboob Shareef presented the results of an informal assessment of child labor that UNICEF employees conducted during this year's cotton harvest. The roundtable was the third gathering of international organizations and foreign diplomats covering the use of child labor in Uzbekistan since the Embassy hosted the first such meeting in August (ref A).

14. (C) Barkin explained that UNICEF employees conducted their informal monitoring in nine provinces of the country, traveling to less developed regions of each province to talk directly with children, their families, teachers, school directors, farmers, and local officials.

#### CHILDREN STILL BEING MOBILIZED THIS YEAR

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15. (C) UNICEF concluded from its informal assessment that the mobilization of children for the cotton harvest has continued this year, despite the government's issuance in September of a National Action Plan, which clearly stated that forced labor by school children should not be permitted (ref B). Barkin explained that during the first part of the harvest in September, it appeared that mostly college and university students were mobilized to pick cotton, not children under age 16. However, as the cotton harvest progressed, UNICEF found that students under 16 were increasingly being mobilized to pick cotton in many regions of the country. When asked, Barkin explained that it was difficult to compare the use of child labor during this year's cotton harvest with previous years, as this was the first year UNICEF conducted such an informal survey and it therefore lacked a reliable baseline for comparison.

16. (C) Despite the lack of a baseline, Barkin noted that the phenomenon of students being mobilized later in the cotton harvest has been observed in previous years. Cotton in Uzbekistan is generally picked in three distinct phases. In the first phase, cotton is most plentiful in the fields, and farmers have less difficulty attracting adult laborers to pick cotton. However, in the second and third phases of the harvest, most of the cotton has already been picked, and it becomes more difficult for farmers to attract adult laborers, many of whom head to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to pick cotton, where wages are higher (ref C). Since the farmers and regional officials still need to meet their cotton quotas, they often depend on mobilized student labor during the later two phases of the harvest.

17. (C) Overall, UNICEF found that the mobilization of students for cotton picking was still widely accepted by local officials, families, and the students themselves. Most adults in Uzbekistan were mobilized to pick cotton as children, and it is still seen by most Uzbeks as a way to earn money for one's family and contribute to the economic development of the country. Shareef added that some children observed picking cotton do so with their parents outside of school hours. On the other hand, Barkin noted that UNICEF had encountered some students who were required to sign letters that they had "voluntarily" participated in the cotton harvest.

## AGE OF STUDENTS AND CONDITIONS VARY CONSIDERABLY BY REGION

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¶18. (C) According to Barkin, UNICEF found that the age of children picking cotton varied considerably by region. In some areas, UNICEF found that the youngest students picking cotton were from the eighth and ninth grades (ages 14 and 15), while in other areas it found students as young as the third grade (age 9) picking cotton, though the vast majority of students in all regions were from the fifth grade or older (11 years and up). In some areas, UNICEF found no children picking cotton or children only picking cotton in the presence of their parents.

¶19. (C) UNICEF also observed that conditions for children picking cotton varied greatly across the country. In some areas, children picked cotton only half the day and attended school the rest of the day, while in other areas students picked cotton all day (from roughly 8 am until 6 pm). In some regions, children were provided food and water (for which they were sometimes, but not always, charged), while in other areas children brought their own food and water from

home. Some students picked cotton for a month and half, while others picked cotton for a few weeks. UNICEF discovered that wages paid to children ranged from roughly 60 to 100 soums per kilo of cotton picked and tended to increase as the harvest progressed (presumably because the amount of cotton left to be picked decreased). In a few areas, UNICEF found that children were promised a wage, but had not yet been paid. Authorities in some regions reportedly refused to honor medical exemptions for students with disabilities. UNICEF reported that students who resisted mobilization were generally threatened with being given lower grades in school.

¶10. (C) According to Barkin, the wide variations in practices across the country can be explained by the fact that local officials and school directors have considerable latitude in deciding whom to mobilize, for how long, and under what conditions. Another important factor was the availability of adult labor in a particular region. Barkin noted that regions where many adults migrated abroad for work tended to be the regions which relied most heavily on mobilizing students. She further explained that in the Ferghana Valley, many adults traveled to Kyrgyzstan to pick cotton, while adults in central and western Uzbekistan went to southern Kazakhstan to pick cotton.

¶11. (C) When asked, Barkin replied that UNICEF considered cotton picking a worst form of child labor when students are forced to pick cotton against their will; when they miss schooling; or when they work for long periods of time in the sun without proper food or water.

## NO EVIDENCE OF CHILDREN EXPOSED TO DANGEROUS PESTICIDES

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¶12. (C) Barkin reported being told by the government and the International Cotton Advisory Council (ICAC) that no harmful pesticides or herbicides are used to produce cotton in Uzbekistan, which relies mostly on organic pesticides and herbicides. Poloff also recently met with a Kazakh farmer who promotes organic farming methods in southern Kazakhstan. The farmer reported that Uzbekistan does not use harmful pesticides and noted that organic farming was more advanced in Uzbekistan than in Kazakhstan (which he partially attributed to the fact that Uzbek farmers are poorer and often cannot afford expensive chemical pesticides and herbicides, ref B).

## GREATER NUMBERS OF ADULTS MOBILIZED THIS YEAR

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¶13. (C) While conducting its informal assessment, UNICEF observed that greater numbers of adults appeared to have been mobilized for the cotton harvest this year than in previous

years, especially in Tashkent and Syrdarya provinces.

¶14. (C) On October 24, the independent Ferghana.ru website reported that Uzbek government employees and military conscripts were mobilized to pick cotton in Tashkent province. The article quoted doctors from Tashkent city's Hamza district, who reported that medical personnel were organized in groups and bused out once a week to pick cotton outside the city, even though there was "almost no cotton left in the fields." The article further reported that teachers at many higher educational institutions in Tashkent and military conscripts have also been mobilized for the cotton harvest (Comment: In late September, poloff observed what appeared to be military conscripts picking cotton on the road between Gulistan and Samarkand. The driver of poloff's

vehicle was surprised, commenting that he never previously saw soldiers picking cotton. End comment.) The article also quoted unnamed local observers as stating that adults were mobilized this year because farmers were still far short of fulfilling their quotas due to water shortages.

¶15. (C) An Embassy employee also told poloff that an acquaintance, who works at a medical clinic in Tashkent, was bused out with other medical personnel to a remote region of Tashkent province one Saturday in October. The medical personnel were ordered to pick 40 kilos of cotton each, even though there was no cotton left in the fields. They were reportedly threatened with their salary being docked if they refused to participate. According to the acquaintance, the doctors and nurses mostly idled until evening, when they were bused back to Tashkent. Each of the medical personnel were later informed that because they each had failed to pick 40 kilos of cotton, they needed to pay 4,000 for the missing cotton (or 100 soums per kilo) (Comment: While it is possible that the money was simply pocketed by local officials, it is also possible that the money was used to purchase cotton from other regions in an attempt to meet cotton quotas. End comment.)

#### UNICEF BLAMES INCLEMENT WEATHER, QUOTAS FOR MOBILIZATION

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¶16. (C) Shareef believed that authorities eventually panicked and turned to mobilizing children and greater numbers of adults this year after it appeared that they would fail to reach their cotton quotas due to poor weather and a disappointing harvest. He explained that the harvest this year was negatively impacted by water shortages over the summer and early rains, which degraded the quality of the cotton remaining in the fields. According to Barkin, authorities mobilized students to a greater extent in regions where poor weather had been forecasted.

¶17. (C) Shareef also blamed the cotton quota system for the persistence of child labor, noting that many regional officials are caught in a bind: on one hand, they are ordered by Tashkent not to mobilize students, but on the other hand, Tashkent still holds them responsible for fulfilling their quotas, which is often very difficult (if not impossible in some cases) for them to accomplish without mobilizing students due to the shortage of adult labor. As the expected punishment for failing to fulfill one's cotton quota clearly outweighs the risk of being punished for mobilizing students, Shareef believed it was no surprise that many regional officials eventually opted to mobilize students in a last ditch effort to fulfill their quotas. He also believed that the pressure on local officials to fulfill their targets increased after President Karimov publicly rebuked the governor of Tashkent province in late September for the region's disappointing cotton output. In contrast, Shareef still believed that the higher-level officials in Tashkent with whom he interacted were genuinely committed to combating child labor.

#### UNICEF AWAITING RESULTS OF GOVERNMENT'S OWN ASSESSMENT

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¶18. (C) The government first requested UNICEF to participate in its assessment of child labor during the cotton harvest, an offer declined by UNICEF, which instead offered to observe the government's assessment. However, authorities never gave UNICEF the final permission to observe the government's assessment. Barkin expected that the government would still share its assessment with UNICEF sometime in the coming

weeks, which she then offered to pass on to the roundtable participants.

¶19. (U) On October 3, the state-controlled Gzt.uz website reported that Uzbek authorities would carry out monitoring across the country to ensure that secondary schoolchildren were not forced to participate in the cotton harvest. A working group - including representatives from the Ministries of Education, Labor, Foreign Economic Relations, and regional officials - reportedly had already been created to conduct the monitoring. According to the article, the group operates until December and will report its results monthly.

¶20. (C) Barkin reported that UNICEF had informed the government that it conducted its own informal assessment and has requested meetings to share its results with the Minister of Labor and Minister of Foreign Economic Relations.

#### UNICEF ARGUES THAT LONG-TERM STRATEGY IS NEEDED

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¶21. (C) Barkin and Shareef argued that the use of child labor during Uzbekistan's cotton harvest cannot be ended overnight, but needed a long-term, step-by-step approach. They criticized the National Action Plan for setting unrealistic goals for what could be achieved in a few months.

Instead, they argued that a comprehensive long-term strategy was needed to combat child labor, one that addressed related and broader issues, such as rural poverty, unemployment, labor migration, and the perverse effects of cotton quotas. As the apparent failure this year of the government's National Action Plan demonstrated, attempts to eliminate the problem overnight are likely to fail as alternative sources of labor are not yet in place.

¶22. (C) Barkin and Shareef reported that UNICEF planned to encourage the government to take steps over the next year that they hope would lead to a decrease in child labor during next fall's cotton harvest. UNICEF also believed that another, more comprehensive and transparent assessment of child labor in Uzbekistan was still needed. They noted that child labor was most likely present not only during the cotton harvest, but in other agricultural activities, though reliable data is lacking.

#### CHILD LABOR NOT RESTRICTED TO UZBEKISTAN

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¶23. (C) Barkin observed that child labor during the annual cotton harvest was not only prevalent in Uzbekistan, but also in other Central Asian states. She reported that students were still mobilized each year by authorities in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. She speculated that the phenomenon received more attention in Uzbekistan because of the larger volume of cotton produced. She also reported that child labor in the agricultural sector existed in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, but was voluntary in nature. She added that the large majority of children picking cotton in southern Kazakhstan were Uzbek children who migrated to work there with their parents (Note: Kazakh NGOs told poloff the same thing during a trip to southern Kazakhstan in early October, see ref B. End note.)

#### BOYCOTT OF UZBEK COTTON HURTING BANGLADESHI PRODUCERS

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¶24. (C) Shareef, who is originally from Bangladesh, also observed that a boycott of Uzbek cotton announced this year by several European and American retailers (including Wal-Mart, Tesco, Hennes and Mauritz, JC Penny, and Marks and



Spencer) was already negatively impacting textile producers in his home country. He warned that those supporting a boycott needed to think of its likely global impact, not only its impact upon the Uzbek government.

¶25. (U) On October 18, Reuters reported that European and American retailers have already told Bangladeshi suppliers that they will not buy ready-made garments if they are produced with cotton sourced from Uzbekistan. The article quotes Bangladesh Textile Mills Association Abdul Hai Sarker as stating that if Bangladeshi textile producers cannot import from Uzbekistan, they will have to "spend at least six cents more for each pound of cotton to import from U.S. sources," which ultimately will increase the cost of finished products by 20 percent. President of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association Alam Chowdhury Parvez is also quoted as fearing that the boycott will make Bangladesh's garment exporters uncompetitive. In addition, the article reported that in a letter to Bangladeshi authorities, Uzbek Deputy Minister for Foreign Economic Relations Nasriddin Najimov dismissed talk of child labor in Uzbekistan as a "conspiracy and mere rumor."

#### OBSERVATION BY EMBASSY OFFICERS

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¶26. (C) The results of UNICEF's informal survey mostly tracked with observations made by Embosffs as they traveled around Uzbekistan's provinces during the past month. On October 21, Information Officer observed young school students (approximately between seven and ten years' old) picking cotton in three separate fields on the road between Bukhara and Samarkand. In addition, she noted that many of the colleges along the road appeared empty, presumably because their students and teachers were picking cotton. In mid-October, Public Affairs Officer observed several children, who appeared to be under 16 years old, picking cotton in Karakalpakstan in mid-October. During a trip to Syrdarya province in early October, poloff spoke with schoolchildren as young as 14 years' old picking cotton alongside their teachers (ref D). In late September, DATT observed a police-escorted convoy of at least 16 school buses filled with children who appeared much younger than 16. The buses appeared to be returning the children to their homes in Namangan city from cotton fields north of the city. The DATT also saw two other groups of students (who appeared older than 16) in Ferghana province, one in a cotton field and one in police-escorted buses.

#### ACCOUNTS BY INDEPENDENT JOURNALISTS AND ACTIVISTS

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¶27. (C) Independent websites and human rights activists have issued numerous articles in the past month regarding the use of child and forced adult labor during Uzbekistan's cotton harvest this year. The articles reported that students and adults were mobilized in Andijon, Ferghana, Namangan, Navoi, Samarkand, Bukhara, Jizzakh, Khorezm, Surkhundarya, and Tashkent provinces. In October, the independent Uznews.net website reported that three students in Jizzakh province died after being mobilized for the cotton harvest: one a first-year college student who reportedly hanged herself after being criticized by teachers for not picking enough cotton; the second a school student who allegedly fell into an irrigation canal and drowned; and the third an eighth grade student who reportedly choked on food while picking cotton. The Rapid Reaction human rights group reported that a first grade student in Surkhundarya province was struck by a car and killed as she was walking to cotton fields with adults and teachers.

¶28. (C) Comment: While we believe that human rights activists and independent journalists are making their best efforts to report on child labor in Uzbekistan, in the past we have found that much of their information on the cotton harvest is impossible to verify and is of questionable

reliability. Any reporting from such sources should be taken with a grain of salt. We continue to believe that UNICEF is providing the most objective and reliable information currently available on the extent of child labor during Uzbekistan's cotton harvest. End comment.

#### LESS LAND TO BE DEVOTED TO COTTON NEXT YEAR

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129. (U) On October 21, several state-controlled newspapers and websites reported that President Karimov signed a decree on October 20 "On Measures to Optimize and Increase the Production of Food Crops." The decree reportedly noted that water shortages over the past several years had negatively impacted cotton productivity and created "additional difficulties in almost all regions of the country." It further reported that the average water available to farmers for irrigation in the past two years was 25 percent less than in previous years. In addition, the decree also noted that food security had become a particularly important issue for Uzbekistan due to recent large increases in world prices for grain and vegetables. The Presidential Decree reportedly envisages reducing the available land for cotton cultivation by an unspecified amount, while increasing the land set aside for growing grain by almost 50,000 hectares, as well as increasing the production of vegetable, oil, and other food crops. On October 28, the state-controlled and Tashkent-based Xalq Sozi newspaper carried an article in which a farmer, Abdushukur Mahmudov, praised President Karimov's decree, stating that it would reduce irrigation problems for farmers.

#### FIRM REPORTEDLY MEETS QUOTA WITHOUT CHILD LABOR

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130. (U) On October 21, the state-controlled UzReport.com website reported that the private Muruvvat-teks firm successfully fulfilled its 2008 state cotton quota, despite a reduction in its sown areas from 12,412 hectares to 10,000 hectares due to water shortages. The article further reported that "not a single child" was used to harvest Muruvvat-teks' fields, which are located in Syrdarya, Jizzakh, and Tashkent provinces. Instead, the firm reportedly used 1,500 "Muruvvat-teks employees," as well as 10,000 seasonal workers who were brought in "from the labor abundant regions" of the Ferghana Valley, Samarkand, and Bukhara. According to the article, Muruvvat-teks worked with local officials to provide accommodation, meals, and transport for the workers.

131. (C) Embassy Economic FSNs reported that Muruvvat-teks is the agricultural branch of Zeromax, which is owned by Uzbek oligarch Odil Tillaev and widely believed to be controlled by President Karimov's eldest daughter Gulnora Karimova. Zeromax has significant stakes in many of Uzbekistan's leading industries, including in the critical mining and the natural gas sectors.

132. (C) Before her departure from Uzbekistan in August, the local International Labor Organization (ILO) representative in Tashkent reported that there were farmers in Uzbekistan

who did not rely on child labor for the cotton harvest. The ILO representative had discussed organizing a project to promote the best practices of such farmers. In addition, the ILO representative was pursuing a project with Uzbekistan's Association of Farmers to create "seasonal work brigades" of adult laborers that could pick cotton instead of children. Unfortunately, ILO has not yet hired a new country representative for Uzbekistan.

#### COMMENT

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133. (C) The government's failure to prevent children from being mobilized for the cotton harvest this year - despite its adoption of a National Action Plan on combating child labor in September - is disappointing, but comes as no

surprise. Poor weather and water shortages this year surely played a role in the decision by local authorities in many regions of the country to continue mobilizing students (and adults) in order to meet their cotton quotas. Moreover, alternatives to child labor are also not yet in place, as many Uzbek adults still travel abroad to pick cotton for higher wages in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. We agree with UNICEF that any plan to combat child labor in Uzbekistan cannot realistically aim to end the problem overnight (as the government attempted to do in its failed National Action Plan), but should be part of a long-term, step-by-step strategy addressing related and broader issues, including rural poverty, unemployment, labor migration, and the perverse effects of cotton quotas. We will continue to urge the government to work closely with UNICEF over the next year to undertake the necessary reforms to ensure that fewer students are mobilized next fall.

134. (C) The government's recent announcement that farmers will be required to grow less cotton next year is a welcome development. It suggests that officials are beginning to understand that reforming Uzbekistan's agricultural sector - where "private" farmers are still required by the state to set aside a certain amount of land each year for cotton production - will spur rural economic development, address water shortages, reduce food prices, and hopefully lead to decreased incidences of child labor.

NORLAND